

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 13-A

PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER  
11 July 1985

# The proper response to terror

By William F. Buckley Jr.

When Rip Van Winkle awoke, one can't imagine a happier discovery than that he had slept through a hostage crisis. I have been incommunicado on the Pacific, and thereby avoided the awful burden of specific advice to Ronald Reagan. Twenty years ago, responding to something I had written on the subject of South Africa, Rebecca West wrote to me: "I agree that anyone who criticizes as I have done the policies of apartheid bears the responsibility of describing a palatable alternative." What was Reagan's palatable alternative?

Flash forward to his stirring address on Monday to the American Bar Association. Here Reagan said that the United States is at war with a loose confederation of international bandits whose aim is the destruction of freedom and the isolation of this country, and that their instrument is terror. He went on to say that the American people have in the past risen to meet such challenges (which is mostly true; in Vietnam, we failed), and that we would do so now. Do what now?

Well, here Reagan was discreet. He told the lawyers that this speech was not an exploration of policy options, but rather an exercise in laying down the factual background. It is a season in which we face (note the word carefully) the need for "sacrifices."

How freighted was that word?

The expense of an air strike against enemy targets isn't much of a sacrifice to the American people. An air strike doesn't cost all that much more than a vice presidential tour of Europe. Of course there is the danger of the pilot being shot down. But Army pilots choose a profession in which risk inheres, even as firefighters and police officers do. What other sacrifices did Reagan have in mind?

Surely the possibility that, in dealing rather forcefully with terrorists, our hostages might die.

There are three levels at which the survival of a hostage held by a terrorist can be viewed. The first assigns total priority to the survival of the hostages. That position was close to the position the government took during the Iranian hostage crisis.

At the other end is a position of the kind associated with total war. When we bombed large areas during the World War II, we knew we would risk dropping bombs on American prisoners of war.

In between is the position that accepts risk for the hostages but presupposes great exertions designed to combine rescue and retaliation. Such a determination guided the Israelis in rescuing their hostages in Entebbe, and the United States, under President Ford, in rescuing our hostages in Cambodia in the Mayaguez incident.

Such a position would have had the President warning the Shiites in Beirut that a massive air strike against that discrete part of the city in which the Shiites dwell would be ordered within 48 hours if the hostages were not released. What would have happened?

We do not know. They might have been released, and that release might have assured the serenity of future hostages, who are bound now to multiply as a result of the success of the Shiite operation. Or, the retaliatory strike might have resulted in the loss of 39 Americans.

The middle way, surely, is the appropriate way. All of Reagan's rhetoric deposits us exactly at that position. (The United States will not be intimidated, we will not suffer atrocities complacently, and so forth.) What we need now is an example. One that is forthright, defensible and designed, for reasons not only of pride, but also of prudence, to rescue the U.S. government from the ignominy of the present situation.

There are seven hostages in the Bekaa Valley, Americans kidnapped as long ago as in the spring of 1984.

Washington disposes of crisis management centers, including the CIA, the National Security Agency, and the Department of Defense. We want our Americans back, and whatever the differences among the fratricidal factions that govern Lebanon, there

is a common interest in avoiding, let us say, a hard military strike of a previously announced target that serves the country on the whole. OK?

Soon now we will be observing yet another anniversary. The contest that ended with the explosion of an atomic bomb had begun four years earlier. It began with Pearl Harbor, and it ended with Hiroshima.

We now rule out apocalyptic stakes because they are planet-shattering in scale. But we do not rule out, and Reagan has said so in as many words, the central propositions, and these are that terrorism at the expense of American citizens will not be tolerated. So will we continue to tolerate it?

*(William F. Buckley, columnist and author, has been on a sailing trip in the Pacific Ocean.)*